DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 828 TM 030 863

AUTHOR Noel, Kathryn A.

TITLE The Role of Responsive Choreography in Alternative Assessment: Sequencing Writing Tasks To Support Concept Assimilation.

PUB DATE 2000-04-00

NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Alternative Assessment; *Concept Formation; Middle School Students; *Middle School Teachers; Middle Schools; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods; Test Construction; *Writing Tests

ABSTRACT

In an attempt to understand, holistically, how teachers make sense of their classrooms and how they use assessment to facilitate learning, this paper explores the use of a metaphor, "responsive choreography," to examine instruction in one classroom. "Responsive choreography" describes the subtle interplay or "dance" between the learner and the teacher in the role of enabling each other. How alternative assessment strategies were used to inform instructional practice and how the teacher's responsiveness made sense of assessment were studied through the analysis of writing tasks for a seventh grade social studies class. Observation of the social studies teacher and student writings indicate that the teacher seldom reached the ideal of responsive choreography. The focus of this teacher appeared to be on what she wanted students to know rather than on student learning and student response. Over the course of the research, the teacher saw the value of being responsive in her instructional choreography, but sustaining this approach would require the re-examination of her instructional practice overall. (Contains 27 references.) (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 441 828

The Role of Responsive Choreography in Alternative Assessment: Sequencing writing tasks to support concept assimilation

Kathryn A. Noel, PhD

Nova Scotia Department of Education
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Paper presented at the 2000 American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, Louisiana
April 24 - 28, 2000

TM030863

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

K. Noel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

There is no question that teaching is a complex activity, and that if done effectively, requires attention to the "complex intellectual and emotional details of teaching situations" because "the details of teaching are critical to a child's learning and sense of well being" (Kilbourn, 1998:4). Further, "in order to understand teaching and, indeed, in order to teach better, it is necessary to attend to those details" (ibid:5) that to a casual observer may be difficult to identify. The attention to detail that includes the "prominent temporal and intellectual features of the events" (ibid:13) is certainly a key factor in coming to understand the complexities of the classroom. However, more than mere attention to these details is necessary in order to begin to understand the nuances of effective teaching. Those details need to be analyzed, not only in isolation but also in the patterns in which they take place in order to comprehend the teaching act holistically. The analysis of teaching-learning events, of specific tasks, of the affective elements of learning and of the use of assessment is critical to the understanding of what teachers do.

The Metaphor

In this attempt to understand, holistically, how teachers make sense of their classrooms and how they use assessment to facilitate learning, this paper explores the use of a particular metaphor, "responsive choreography," to examine instruction in one classroom. Metaphors are useful in that they allow for the explanation of complex ideas through their connection to previously understood concepts. Simply describing the individual components of what occurs in classrooms gives only limited insight into the complexity and nuances of the interplay between teaching and learning. To illuminate and to characterize the subtle complexity of interactions and of their translation into instructional decisions, the metaphor "responsive choreography" is used but first must be explained, illustrated and elaborated in the context of a classroom.

Responsive choreography builds on Eisner's (1991) notion of connoisseurship. He uses this term to describe "the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest" (p. 68). It is a process through which educators attend to everything to which they are exposed, regardless of its importance. This suggests one way of considering how teachers make sense of classrooms, but it does not help us to understand the students' active role in and influence on the process of teaching and learning.

An expansion of Eisner's idea may be Langer's (1997) notion of "mindfulness," which suggests that we must constantly seek to understand what we may have taken for granted. The characteristics, she states, are "the continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information and an implicit awareness to more than one perspective" (p. 4). In applying this model to teaching, the information that teachers must analyse is derived from students' actions,

perspectives, and responses to teachers' decisions. In this respect, the notion incorporates Goodman's (1978) "kid watching" as an essential part of sound instructional practice and suggests that to be mindful is critical if instructional practice is to be improved or to be modified to meet the needs of specific students.

The notion of responsive choreography, then, not only employs the cognitive aspects of classroom interaction, that is, knowing the material of the curriculum, but also incorporates the affective domain in conjunction with the subtle nuances of action and of the teacher's and students' understanding of the classroom. If the instructional choreography is truly responsive, the partnership between the teacher and the student leads to a level of student learning demonstrably deeper than in those lessons in which the responsive partnership does not exist.

What is "responsive choreography"?

In order to determine whether students truly understand a concept requires that teachers are not only aware of, but also are mindful of or responsive to the subtleties of students' responses in much the same way as experienced dance partners are responsive to each other. This requires a knowledge of past action, as in patterns of thought and behaviours; a sensitivity to and accurate analysis of what happens in the moment; and an ability to predict accurately what is likely to happen next. One way to characterize this interaction is to use the metaphor "responsive choreography" as it aptly describes the subtle intersubjective dance between the learner and the teacher in the role of enabling other, as Vygotsky (1978) conceived of it. This concept acknowledges the pre-planned choreography of well-considered, organized structures or frameworks of carefully designed assignments, activities, lessons or tasks that incorporates an assessment of past action.

However, this choreography may be modified by the teacher in response to students' answers, affective reactions, questions, demonstrated understandings or misunderstandings, gaps in knowledge or general classroom behaviour, and thus becomes a responsive choreography. Although "responsiveness" suggests that the teacher's action *follows* an earlier action by a student, it is possible for "responsiveness" to *precede* a student's response.

One key component of responsiveness is the assessment of students' work and behaviours beyond tests that merely give information about students' recall and understanding, and not necessarily about assimilation of facts and concepts. Although they may be aware of alternative modes of assessment, teachers may feel that tests offer rigour and have a reliability that other alternative assessments lack. One means to gain understanding of the process through which teachers make instructional decisions based on assessment practices is to examine what they learn by using assessment tools in relation to how they use other evidence of students' assimilation of subject area concepts. Gaining a better insight into the interplay between these interactions and decisions about assessment practice will likely give us better insight into how teachers respond to increasingly complex classrooms.

Using the notion of responsive choreography, this paper reports on a study which examined a teacher's responses to her social studies class in an urban middle school serving a district with a majority of immigrants and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The class could be described as multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-ability and multi-linguistic, thus providing a distinct opportunity for the teacher to practice instructional and assessment modification to meet individual student needs. During the six-month investigation period, effective and ineffective patterns of alternative assessment tools and their effectiveness began to emerge.

This teacher approached the problems that she faced based on her underlying assumptions about instruction, about effective assessment, and about the needs of the students. Part of the difficulty that she experienced originated in an administrative mandate to "cover the curriculum" and in her own readily apparent lack of understanding of the affective domain in learning and assessment. In her case, covering the curriculum within the specified span of time, regardless of students' needs or abilities, dictated her focus on very traditional instructional and assessment methods. However, when examining assessment tools and the evidence of learning or lack thereof that these tools presented, definite patterns of analysis of instruction, of teacher-student interaction, of instructional decision making, and of assessment occurred.

The questions framing this study are : How are alternative assessment strategies used to inform instructional practice?; How might we characterize the responsiveness through which teachers make sense of their assessment practices?; and Where does this lead us in our understanding of the holistic act of teaching as represented by responsive choreography?

Method

In weekly audio taped meetings, the teacher's plans for incorporating writing tasks and the outcomes of previous writing activities were discussed. A schedule of questions guided our reflection on the effectiveness of the activities and provided the framework for the ensuing discussions; however, these meetings also included topics initiated by the teacher or by me in response to our assessment of the students' written products, oral comments, or classroom behaviours. While lessons were observed and audio taped and field notes kept, writing tasks and written products were sorted and analyzed using Needles's (1992) categories for writing and by using other research findings about learning. Throughout the duration of the study, informal discussions and audio taped formal interviews were conducted with students and data were gathered from school files. In addition, formal and informal interviews were held with administration and staff.

In the first stage of analysis, the assigned writing tasks were sorted and analyzed using Needles's (1992) categories of "noncomposed," "composed (restricted)," and "composed (extended)" text and can be thought of as a hierarchical taxonomy of writing tasks. "Noncomposed" writing describes those writing activities that do little to encourage or to provoke thought. There is no opportunity for students to manipulate language or ideas presented or

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

otherwise to reconstruct knowledge for themselves. Most fill-in-the-blank questions serve as examples in this category.

"Composed (restricted)" writing describes those writing activities in which students, through constructing their own sentences, have some opportunity to strengthen the links among ideas and to make their own connections or understanding. Short answer questions that invite students to answer in a few sentences fit into this category.

"Composed (extended)" writing allows students to create their own written pieces. The teacher may provide a general framework from which the students develop these pieces, or they may create this written work independently. Journals, poems, and essays are the kinds of writing which are in this category.

In the second stage of analysis, students' written products were photocopied and analyzed using categories developed from the literature on indicators of learning evident in students' writing. This analysis of students' written work was done throughout the study and the data taken back to the weekly meetings with the teacher, in which the analyzed written samples served to inform the teacher's plans for written tasks in subsequent lessons.

Grade 7 Social Studies: The History Component

The history component of this Grade 7 social studies course got under way in the last week of September. In a week of preliminary activities, myths, legends and time lines were discussed and explored. In the first week of October, the first of three thematic units began and an account of this initial unit is presented here. The focus of this unit is on the native peoples, and the writing activities in which students were engaged is categorized as being the result of a "noncomposed" writing activity, a "composed (restricted)" writing activity, or a "composed (extended)" writing activity.

In this first unit, students were invited to consider how North America came to be inhabited by the native peoples and to imagine the difficulties faced. These lessons, which took place over a seven-week period, included seven different writing-related activities. Among these activities were answering textbook-related questions, creating poems, labelling maps, doing mini-projects, conducting interviews, investigating the lifestyle of specific native populations, and writing letters. Some activities were more successful than others in helping students to learn about native peoples.

This unit of activities was the first of three units forming the entire history segment of the Grade 7 social studies course. In each unit, Inge, the participating teacher, and I followed a pattern of weekly planning sessions in which we evaluated previous lessons and students' progress and made plans for future activities.

1.0 Activities

The Grade 7 social studies textbook contained four pages which pertained to the Beringia Land Bridge. The chapter began by posing key questions for consideration with headings

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

summarizing each set of two or three paragraphs, guiding the students through the main points. Two very large illustrations accompanied the information presented: one depicted the impact of the growing ice sheets on the sinking sea level which turned the Bering Strait into a dry plain: the other showed woolly mammoths of North Siberia being stalked by hunters. At the end of this section, several related questions invited students to recall, to consider, and to extend what had been presented. In spite of the many prompts and signposts throughout the material, many students in Inge's class needed help to read, to find, and to understand the information presented.

1.1. The Beringia Land Bridge: Textbook-related questions

Inge composed twelve knowledge and comprehension level questions based on the social studies textbook's explanation of the Beringia Land Bridge. These she designed to assist students in gleaning the most important information from the chapter. In this composed (restricted) writing activity, the students were directed to read assigned pages, to find answers and to write responses in full sentences in their notebooks.

In addition, Inge asked students to choose one of three activities from the textbook's "Be Creative" section. Some suggested options were: draw a poster or write a poem related to the origins of the native peoples in North America; draw several pictures of the Beringia Land Bridge; or present a TV news report including interviews, new evidence, and different points of view on the origins of native peoples. The poem and news report can be viewed as composed (extended) activities, while the poster and labelled drawings may be described as noncomposed activities.

Students were given one period in which to do this work, but had until the following week to submit it. Once submitted, the work was graded by Inge and then returned.

Inge described the task of writing answers to the questions from the textbooks as "working okay"[1]. Those students who had handed in their work had been able to answer the questions posed. There is evidence in their work of attempts to give thorough answers in full sentences, and the writing is neatly done. For the most part, students seemed to have searched for sentences in the book that would best answer the questions that Inge had set. These fragments were simply copied with students inserting their own creative spelling.

Inge's records show that a number of students had been given marks well beyond merely passing grades for similar previous assignments, although she chose not to grade this particular one. However, her mark book also reveals that the majority of students did not hand in the assignments, although their exercise books show that many of them had begun the work but did not complete it.

For Inge, the pressing issue was not that the students did not understand the work, but rather that most were not spending an adequate amount of time and effort doing it. She was convinced that the students were more capable than their marks suggested; they simply did not read the questions properly or did not consider the answers carefully enough. She made assumptions

1 Planning session: Oct. 17.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

about their effort and ability which, in turn, coloured her response to them and influenced the decisions she made about tasks that would be helpful to them and that they would be able to do.

1.2 The Journey Poems

One of Inge's stated goals was to increase the students' motivation in an attempt to increase their effort. She began this next series of lessons by establishing what the students already knew and could do.

Inge encouraged their participation by asking students what tools artists use and wrote the proffered suggestions on the board. Then she related these to some of the conventions in art which they had been studying: elements, texture, space, value, shape and line. She drew a comparison between these tools and those used in writing, once again encouraging students to offer their ideas. When she asked why an artist might paint a picture, she received the helpful response, "To share his experience with someone else"[2] .

The students were focussed and quiet; Inge had their interest. She explained that in order to present an impression of the world in a new and effective way, one needs to write or to paint using lots of detail. Then, while drawing a picture on the board, she demonstrated how by adding detail, a variety of feelings or responses might be elicited from an audience. Students continued to participate, making observations about feelings that were evoked in them by the drawing. Inge summarized the point that had been made: "When you add details, you give your audience more information. You help your audience to share your experience by helping them to imagine."[3]

Inge then asked students to describe a place, "Point A," using words that referred to the five senses. The students gave thoughtful answers and continued to look involved: eyes following Inge's board work, faces revealing their concentration. She asked them to repeat this exercise, thinking of a second place, "Point B," and then on the blackboard she connected these two points with a line.

"Can you name things that connect two places or items?" she asked.

"Bridges. Land bridges," came the replies.

Inge asked them now to consider "Point A" as Siberia and "Point B" as America. She told them to write a series of single words that would describe each of these places as well as the journey one might take to get from one to the other. Inviting them to consider how a particular setting might impact upon one's senses, she asked them to imagine that they were "Indians crossing the land bridge." For the last half of the period, students did just that, busily sharing ideas and strategies while creating lists of descriptive words.

Because students were asked to contribute only single words, or at most short phrases, this task might be mistakenly categorized as a noncomposed writing activity. However, the opportunities in this writing activity for students to make links to their prior knowledge and to

2 Observation notes: Oct. 17.

3 Ibid.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

make their own connections of other sorts take this activity to a higher level in the taxonomy. Students were encouraged to present their own understanding of the concepts and, as a result, this writing goes beyond the boundaries of noncomposed writing. Unlike a fill-in-the-blanks exercise, which is highly structured and which does not usually allow for students' own meaning making, students considered, evaluated and chose words which seemed most appropriate to them given their own understandings of land bridges. This activity, then, can be considered as a composed (restricted) writing task.

At the beginning of the next lesson, there was a great deal of peer pressure levelled at noisy students in an effort to get them to quiet down so that the class could begin. In short order, students were attentive. Inge introduced five lists of words that she had already written on the board. Each of the five senses acted as a heading for a column of synonyms and sense-related descriptive vocabulary. Inge summarized some of the difficulties that she had noticed that students had the previous day while trying to produce their lists of words.

She asked students to close their eyes and to listen closely to her description of an imaginary journey. Accompanied by an audiotape of a rainforest, Inge began to tell them in lush detail of the imaginary setting and of her observations. The students were enthralled. As she continued the narrative of her imaginary journey, describing changes in scenery and her own reactions, she played a variety of background sounds.

When she finished, Inge asked students for their responses to what they had heard. They related the details of the many feelings, sights, smells, tastes and other sounds they had imagined. Inge explained how she had created those images through her choice of sounds and carefully chosen words. She then asked them to write down in their journals as many words as they could that were related to what they had imagined, but she stressed that they should pay special attention to how they had *felt* while listening to the narrative.

Inge told them of an artist who as a pre-activity for his sculpting had travelled in a circle, all the while writing descriptions of the experience. In a future class, they too would try a similar exercise. They were going to walk several times in a large circle of sorts around the neighbourhood, each time choosing a different focus and recording their descriptions. These words would then be written into poems.

Inge used not only social studies classes but also language arts classes to continue this work. Following their journey through the neighbourhood, students wrote new lists of words which they were then to write "in sentences as poems"[4]. These "Journey" poems had very specific criteria. Inge had decided that there had to be three different sections, each one a description: words that related to the five senses; words that related to the comforts and hardships of people and to how people might feel; and words that related to the consequences of effects.

When asked about her objectives for this assignment, Inge paused. After some

4 Planning session: Oct. 17.

consideration, she said, "I suppose I want them to focus on some descriptive language"[5]. Students had written rather bland sentences in their language arts assignments, and she hoped that by focussing their attention on descriptive vocabulary in these "Journey" poems, they would then be able to transfer this knowledge to their sentence writing. However, Inge was not sure how she might purposefully plan and instruct to initiate and facilitate that transference.

In a lesson the following week, Inge modelled and discussed this genre. She showed the students several forms that their "Journey" poems might take, emphasizing that the way words were placed or the style or size in which they were written would help to convey specific images and emotions. She told them: "It's up to you to use the space on the page as you want to...Think about the words' visual impact. The way you write the words should symbolize what the words mean"[6]. Inge asked me to circulate among the students, helping her to proofread the students' rough drafts of their "Journey" writing before they produced their final poems.

Inge told me that she was pleased with both the students' effort and their final poems, which she had tacked up on the bulletin board at the front of the room next to the narrative time lines that they had completed several weeks earlier. Their poems were constructed of single words or phrases that, with rare exception, had been appropriately chosen. As well, the students' neatness suggested that they had made a genuine effort to do well in this assignment.

This work was evidence of the students' sound effort: it met the criteria for word selection; it had been neatly done; and it was organized. The students were trying, which seemed to point to progress. Now that we had their cooperation, Inge and I hoped that we might begin to see evidence of learning.

The tasks within Activity 1.2, listing single words of the students' own choosing, elaborating on these lists, and drafting poems, were opportunities for composed (restricted) and composed (extended) writing. The higher the position of the tasks in the taxonomy, the more students could show us what they understood and what they did not yet understand. Further, as their responses to the various activities suggested, the closer the task was to the composed (extended) writing, the easier it became for us to determine the nature of their confusion or of the specific gaps in their comprehension.

It should also be noted that all students, regardless of ability, writing skill, or native language, were able to do the activities that culminated in the "Journey" poems. As well, many students made a point of telling us how they enjoyed the lessons, and most seemed to exhibit pride in their final products.,

"The "Journey" [poems] were a surprise," Inge told me[7]. All students had been required to submit them, and only three had not done so. Although this might have been a turning point in Inge's struggle to gain the students' cooperation, she was cautious:

---

5 Ibid.

6 Observation notes: Oct. 28.

7 Planning session: Nov. 1.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> ...sometimes the spelling wasn't right because they hadn't handed in the rough copies, but they really put in the effort to try to do it. Some of them had just 'whipped it off,' but at least I have everybody participating.[8]

It was clear that from discussions with students not only did they recognize that this set of activities was within their abilities, but also these activities gave them a sense of ownership of the resulting poems. Each poem had a shared root: the vicarious experience that Inge provided with her audiotapes and accompanying narrative. But even in that lesson, students began to take their work in different directions: the word lists and poems became distinctly unique creations, reflections of students' own understandings and ideas.

In our regularly scheduled weekly session, I shared my observations and the students' comments with Inge. Although I was quite encouraged by these changes and believed them to be signs of progress, Inge was cautious and less convinced that these were signs of any real change or growth.

1.3 Labelling Maps

The first mapping activity that Inge assigned involved the students labelling photocopied maps that had been given to them. She was aware that the students had very little knowledge of geography and felt that it was important that they understand the patterns of habitation of the first peoples in North America. Inge drew a map of North America on the blackboard and labelled the areas where different native tribes had lived. She asked the students to copy these labels from the board onto their photocopied sheets and to colour these maps.

This activity can be classified as noncomposed writing. Students were asked to copy words onto a photocopied map, and Inge told them exactly how their labelling was to be done. In a very real sense, this activity mimicked a fill-in-the-blanks exercise, for students had no opportunity to develop their own understanding through their own exploration or manipulation of language or materials. Although not entirely passive, students were not actively engaged in their own learning in this activity. In fact, as I observed students at work, I noted that although they were busily colouring and labelling their maps, they were doing so while they were thinking of other things. The discussions I overheard as the students chatted noisily were completely unrelated to social studies[9]. Copying and colouring did not demand their full attention.

A couple of lessons later, Inge handed the graded maps back to the students[10]. She reviewed what she had expected the students to do in that assignment: to copy the names of the tribes from the map drawn on the board, putting them on the appropriate places on their maps; consulting the textbook for climatic regions; and colouring and labelling the different regions. Inge clearly was not satisfied with the work that the students had submitted and told them that they

---

8 Ibid.

9 Observation notes: Oct. 29.

10 Observation notes: Nov. 4.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

would redo it "until they [got] it right"[11]. Some students, she said, had not copied the labelled areas from the board correctly nor had they coloured in these regions properly. Now having made her expectations clear, new sheets were handed out, and once again Inge drew and labelled a sample map on the blackboard. Students were to hand in this latest effort the following day.

The students, who had been most attentive during Inge's evaluative comments on their original maps, got to work quickly. As they began to redo their work, Inge reminded them of the importance of making their maps aesthetically pleasing and accurate in detail, and coached those students who needed help. Some students called out work-related questions to Inge, and although the students seemed rather noisy, they appeared to be quite industrious.

Meanwhile, I walked around the room and looked at the students' graded work that had been returned to them. Given Inge's dissatisfaction with the students' maps, I was surprised to see that she had actually given most students a passing grade or better. A number of the original submissions seemed quite acceptable to me, too, and I wondered why she was so insistent that this work be redone. My impression was that Inge had set rather high standards for the task, but I suspected that her having the students redo this assignment had more to do with her intention to train them to do their best than it had to do with the actual products themselves. Nevertheless, even after the bell rang to signal the beginning of their recess time, most of the students, who seemed quite involved in their maps, chose to continue their work.

Several days later, Inge told me that the students had done a better job of using a legend in their second set of maps. Even though a few students had either failed the assignment or had not handed in the work, Inge was fairly pleased with the students' overall improvement in labelling maps. Many students had marks of 23 out of 25 and "a lot of them received 19 or 16"[12]. I described these marks as "solid"; Inge confessed that she had "marked them hard," taking marks off for spelling errors and such. She stated:

> I was very particular because I want them to know that I do have standards, but at the same time they also know that if they hand something into me, I'm flexible. So, for that person, I know it's good work. So I'll write: "This is a great job!"

Inge said that the class understood her explanation to them that if two students of differing ability received the same grade, that the grade did not mean that the two pieces of work were of equal standard. Students whose work showed evidence of academic difficulty, but who nevertheless were seen to be doing their best, would get marks that reflected their effort, perhaps even more than they reflected the quality of the products themselves. Inge discouraged students from comparing their grades with those of their peers, stressing individual differences and personal issues that might influence performance.

It is interesting, though, that none of these students retained their map work. None was

---

11 Ibid.

12 Planning session: Nov. 8.

available for my analysis. Even those students who had been given good marks for their efforts soon lost these photocopied maps. This may be because the maps were on separate pieces of paper rather than on pages in their notebooks. However, one might very well wonder why students did not make a special effort, such as stapling or taping the maps into their notebooks, in order to keep such elaborate work. One possible explanation may be that their role in this activity was restricted. This work may have been perceived by them as the teacher's activity rather than their own, and perhaps students' products were more important to Inge than they were to the students. In any event, the students' response in this exercise were very different from that which we had witnessed with the "Journey" poems.

1.4. Textbook-based Questions as a Mini-project

One of Inge's practical problems was the amount of reading and note taking that she thought was necessary but that she realized was beyond the capabilities of most students, given the time scheduled by the social studies convenor for the completion of specific textbook chapters. Inge decided that rather than insist that each student try to do all of the necessary chapters individually, she would have groups learn about particular topics and then share what they had learned with peers through class presentations.

Inge designed a series of textbook-based questions and related activities on native peoples written as instruction sheets. Having already chosen the members of the groups in an effort to minimize the students' chatting and to maximize their production, she asked students to choose one topic from the five presented to them: hunting, religion, resources, fishing and farming, and dwellings and transportation. Each topic's sheet of instructions included reading certain pages of the textbook; writing short summaries of some of the most pertinent information; creating a song, drawing or dance; and defining key words. Inge told students that they would be given three or four periods in which to work on this, and that those would also include language arts and art classes, but that this "[depended] on how well [they worked]"[13].

For example, their instructions on the sheet for "hunting" were as follows:

1. Look at pages 20-21 and 24-27.
2. In one short paragraph describe 1 of the following:
   a) The steps the hunter goes through in preparing to harpoon a seal.
   b) The method the Beothuks use to hunt and kill caribou.
3. Draw a picture which illustrates one of the following:
   a) The seal hunt
   b) The caribou hunt
   c) The buffalo hunt
4. Define the following words (p.26-27)
   a) hide b) sinew c) dung d) horn e) tongue

[13] Observation notes: Oct. 29.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

All work generated by the group, Inge explained, would be put onto a poster. Later, working on the answer to the second question, a boy in a group chose to write notes directly from the text, which he planned to rewrite in his own words, while the other four participated in designing the accompanying illustration.

In the last social studies class before the presentations were due, Inge reminded students that they would be videotaped and that late work would not be accepted[14]. Most students immediately got to work, and although the noise level in the room was fairly high, students seemed to be productive.

Meanwhile Inge circulated among the students, reminding them of what they were expected to do and of the time constraints. Inge had already given the class an extra day to complete their preparation for the group presentations because the students had not finished. Inge felt that they could have completed this work as scheduled, but that they had just wasted their time.

At the end of the period, Inge collected the projects, although none was completely finished. Once again, Inge outlined the consequences for late work. The following day, she put an announcement on the school intercom stating that the students could work on their projects at lunch time.

When students presented their work a few days later, Inge tried to videotape them, but the rest of the class was too talkative. One group at the back of the class even tried to finish their own work while others were presenting, and so Inge would not allow them to present. Eventually, Inge decided to stop taping.

Inge had the presenters write down the mark that they thought they should receive after considering what contribution they had made and whether they thought that they could do better. Inge then showed these students some work that another class had done on the same project. They had typed their answers to the questions, attached these to their posters, and coloured in their illustrations.

Inge's class had been suitably impressed, realizing that this work "was of a much higher standard." Inge asked them why they had not produced something that was as good and told them that she expected that by Grade 7 they should be taking pride in themselves, producing something that "looks good, is legible, [and] has no spelling mistakes." She told them that she would not accept poor quality work from them, since she believed that they could do better.

However, Inge remarked to me that the other teacher had organized this work slightly differently from the way that Inge had. First, the teacher had allocated five periods instead of three in which to do the work. Second, she had given very specific instructions regarding the final product: "It had to be clear; it had to be legible; it had to be coloured in; and so on." Inge told me, "She was *very* specific in what she wanted." As a consequence, Inge explained, most of those students had fulfilled the set criteria. Inge, on the other hand, wanted her students to "do [these

[14] Observation notes: Nov. 5.

things] on their own and to take the initiative." She didn't want to "treat them like little kids"[15]. However, the clear articulation of criteria for evaluation may have contributed to the other class's superior work.

Inge's students had asked if they could redo their work, but Inge refused saying that she was spending her "entire time marking and re-marking because [they were] not putting in the initial effort"[16]. One group's work Inge graded as a B, while the others received Cs and Ds.

Once again, all of the corrected work quickly disappeared, and nothing could be gathered for analysis. I had approached students and asked them to allow me to photocopy their work, but they either had already lost it or had not completed it. Both Inge and I were becoming concerned about this pattern, and we found this futile attempt to gather their work rather frustrating.

I wondered about the impact of Inge's tightly structured activities and about her ownership of the learning. Would the students be more genuinely involved in these tasks if they were the originators of questions or the designers of projects? Inge cared a great deal about the quality of the products; her meticulously detailed instructions certainly hinted at this. If it were the *students* who were thinking as carefully about what they wanted to do and why, might they be as concerned as Inge about the results of their work?

1.5 Interviewing Immigrants

Inge and I decided to have students consider countries of origin of their families and compare their reasons for immigrating with those of the early native peoples who had been motivated to trek across the land bridge. Inge thought that we might also have students interview one another about their various cultures. Finally, the students could examine the native cultures as other sets of beliefs and customs that were both similar to and different from those that were familiar.

I thought that the idea of beginning with the students' own knowledge or experience was an excellent one. With such a foundation for the new learning, the students might have a greater chance of success. After all, if we could relate the curricular material to what they already knew or had lived, then they might be more likely to understand the presented information and concepts and to see them as meaningful.

Students prepared to interview peers about their families' immigration to Canada. In groups, they brainstormed questions which they thought a newscaster might ask. These questions Inge then displayed on the blackboard, and each student was instructed to choose 15 of those which seemed most appropriate to him/her. Students were then told to add ten more questions of their own for a total of 25 questions to ask their peers in the interviews.

In another lesson, Inge had students organize questions according to the kinds of information on which they focussed: personal; related to a native country; details of the journey;

---

15 Planning session" Nov. 8.

16 Ibid.

first impressions of Canada: and impressions after ten years. She asked them to be sure that they had prepared questions for each of the categories. Rough copies of the interview questions were first done in the students' notebooks and then rewritten in "good copy" and submitted to Inge to be checked and corrected.

Inge then very briefly demonstrated appropriate and inappropriate interview techniques and clearly outlined her expectations of the students. She insisted that during their interviews the students write down all of the answers to their questions.

After the students interviewed one another, Inge asked them to consider what they had learned by having done the activity and asked them to write answers to the following questions[17]:

Are there any new questions you would have liked to have asked [but didn't]? Why?

What would you change if you could do the interview again?

What did you learn from doing this project?

The interview questions that the students chose to ask reflect their interest in obtaining information of a biographical and cultural nature. As well, Inge's mark book shows that she was fairly satisfied with the students' work in this activity.

The writing tasks in this set may be useful to examine more closely. The initial task of brainstorming or of creating questions that students wished to ask an immigrant can be considered as an example of composed (restricted) writing. The writing was of minimal length, but it provided students with the chance to pursue their own interests and to consider what they understood of the people whom they intended to interview and of their countries of origin. In addition, it helped them to realize and to consider what they did not know but about which they were curious. In that process lay the opportunity for the construction of knowledge, for meaning making. That students then shared their questions with each other and reexamined their original ones took this process a step farther. Again, there were opportunities to consider prior knowledge, relevancy of that knowledge to the task at hand, and to consider the information that was missing. It is no wonder that students initially were interested in this activity.

As with the "Journey" poems, all students began this task from the same starting point: Inge's introduction of the lesson; her outlining of the steps in the task; and her teacher-led discussion of the interview process. After that, though, students had a great deal of control over the creation of their own questions.

Perhaps the students' loss of interest in getting and in recording answers to these questions should not surprise us. Although at first glance this activity might appear to be student-centred or student-controlled, on closer examination, one can see that it is considerably more structured or teacher-led than it might seem. Inge's control of the steps within and the details of this activity results in the writing task having more in common with a fill-in-the-blanks exercise than with a report of an interview. Students might very well have been interested in *asking* these questions, but they did not share Inge's belief that organizing the questions by type and noting the answers

17 Observation notes: Nov. 18.

were important or useful tasks. To them, these steps may have seemed unnecessary, and therefore might have held no more interest to them than copying mindlessly from a textbook. As a consequence, their affective engagement in the activity may have plummeted. This, in turn, might explain how it is that this part of the activity, that of noncomposed writing, was very poorly done.

Inge was concerned about finding activities that would maintain the students' motivation. She was becoming increasingly frustrated, and in addition to her voicing her impatience, there were physical signs that she was feeling stressed. She began to suffer from migraine headaches, back problems, and fatigue. She was desperate to find activities that would engage the students and that would result in their submitting their best efforts.

1.6 The Major "Native Peoples Project"

In the social studies project on "Native Peoples," Inge had provided students with a variety of books, most of which contained a small amount of information on many different native peoples throughout North America. Each group of students was assigned a certain indigenous population to study. They were expected to begin the project by reading for specific information, which Inge had outlined in note form on a handout. From there they were to decide how they wanted to proceed, perhaps choosing to compare that group with another or to compare one group's past and present ways of life. Whatever they chose to do, Inge told them that they were to consult additional sources.

One thing that students had to do was to build a three-dimensional object that was related to the particular aspect of the native group they were studying. If they were researching a specific native shelter, for instance, the students were expected to build a model of one. She explained, "I wanted them to do something in which they really had to think about how it was made, [and what significance it had for those people, and so on]," but the rest of the presentation was up to them[18].

Students seemed very interested in their three-dimensional work in this project. Many began asking Inge if they might come into the classroom early in the morning to continue building and painting their models. They seemed eager not only to complete these, but also to do well. Because Inge was usually at school very early anyway, she encouraged the students to join her[19].

Inge set the deadline for the completion of these projects as the first Friday in December. By the end of the third week in November, Inge and I agreed that the students' projects seemed "to be going well so far," although Inge added, "But who knows?"[20]. Students had been approaching both Inge and me for help in finding appropriate materials and in translating various textbook passages into everyday language.

There had been some trying days, however. For example, Inge had given the students a

---

[18] Planning session: Nov. 8.

[19] Discussion notes: Nov. 4

[20] Planning session: Nov. 22.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

period in which to work on these projects, but "they just weren't into it"[21]. I tried to analyze the problem:

K: Okay. Why weren't they into it?

I: They just...they were in a very social and talkative mood. It was just one of those days where you couldn't get them to do anything.

K: Was the period that you gave them at the end of the day?

I: Umhm.

K: Oh. Okay. Thursday at the end of the day.

I: Yeah.

K: That is a factor.

I: And they like had lots of work. They had to..there were three things they had to do.

K: Okay. So three things they had to do.

I: And they just they had that opportunity and two of them took it up and then the rest just wasted their time.

On the day that the work was due to be presented and the project itself submitted, Inge discovered that several students had not yet finished and were not ready to present. Inge had been absent the day before, but since there had been no social studies scheduled for that day anyway, it is unlikely that the students expected extra class time in which to work on their projects. It is perhaps more likely that some students had gambled that Inge would be absent for more than one day. In any case, Inge took down their names and told these students that they would now have to bring letters from their parents explaining why their projects were not finished on time. Failing to do so would mean that they would lose a grade for each day the work was late and therefore fall from an A to a B and so on. Inge told students that no projects would be accepted after the following Monday.

Students who were prepared took turns going up to the front of the class. The first student to present, a girl whom Inge described as "bright," made her way to the blackboard, but seemed unsure of how to proceed. She asked what she was supposed to do. Inge, from her place at the back of the classroom, coached her: "Tell us the title of your project, what you were focussing in on, and explain what you've done"[22].

Students in turn showed their posters of information and their three-dimensional objects. On their posters many had included maps, definitions, and drawings and some students had several pages of hand-written information in an accompanying folder.

At the end of the period, Inge asked students to write self- and peer evaluations of the presentations. On the board Inge wrote six items to which students busily responded[23]:

1. What makes a good presentation? List six things.

---

21 Ibid.

22 Audiotape of presentations: Dec. 6.

23 Observation notes: Dec. 6.

2. The best three presentations today were done by...
3. The hardest part about presenting is...
4. Six things I learned today are...
5. I think I deserve this mark [of] __ because...
6. If I could do it over again, I would...

The presentations continued the following day, and those students who had not been prepared the day before gave presentations first.

All students who presented on both days were able to discuss the native group which they had studied and most were able to answer questions posed by their peers, Inge and me. Because several common themes such as shelter and food ran through most presentations, the class often heard similar information repeated with only slight variations. Students noticed and commented on these common themes.

In the days and weeks following the presentations, a number of students agreed to meet with me individually or in pairs over their lunch hours to discuss their project work. All spoke enthusiastically, convinced that it had been a worthwhile learning experience.

Several students also told me that they had learned "new words that [they] wouldn't have been able to use before [they] studied...the native peoples"[24]. Students cited such words as "nomadic," "wigwam," "windigo," and "shaman" as words that they had learned through doing the project. Furthermore, students told of having considered the nuances of meaning of the "new" words that they were learning as well as of their more commonly used vocabulary[25].

Inge evaluated students' oral presentations separately from their written project work and three-dimensional models. Her grades indicate that she was satisfied with the work.

The writing in this major project began with Inge's framework of key concepts and topics that served to guide students to the pertinent material. Writing tasks, though, were composed (extended) and this encouraged students to build their own understandings of the bits and pieces of information. All students interviewed were keenly aware of their interest and learning in this project, and they often made comments that reflected their sustained affective engagement throughout this activity.

Inge's decision to provide a framework of key concepts and topics, followed by independent student research, seems to have been a very good one. Students not only found such a framework helpful but also appreciated having the combination of assistance in the form of teacher guidance and of creative freedom that this structure offered.

In the next writing activity, more opportunity was given to students to consider what relevant knowledge they already possessed and what questions they themselves had. Not only were students able to articulate more clearly from the beginning of the writing activity what they

24 Interview with Tran and Bill: Dec. 10.
25 Ibid.

knew and what they wanted to find out, but also it is they who suggested an appropriate way to access the missing information.

1.7 Letters to Schefferville

Although pleased with students' projects on native peoples, Inge wanted to do more to help her pupils to develop a respect for that culture, to consider points of view within those communities, and to empathize with their concerns. She reasoned that in addition to an awareness of such issues as the impact of pollution and industrialization on native culture and lifestyle, her students might also benefit from the discovery that they actually shared some concerns and views with native peoples.

I suggested to Inge that one approach to consider was a pen pal system. I proposed that her students write to native students in schools in which I had worked, and she enthusiastically agreed. I offered to contact some teachers whom I knew who were either working on native reserves or who were teaching in schools in which there were many native students. I would ask these teachers if they were interested in having their pupils communicate with ours.

By the beginning of November, Inge had received an over-sized envelope from Schefferville, Quebec, filled with letters from a combined Grade 7/8 class. Included in this package was a covering letter from their teacher, some photocopied photographs, and a locally published article that summarized the changes in the Naskapi Cree lifestyle over the last thirty years.

The Naskapi Cree students' letters gave the expected autobiographical information and descriptions of their school and village on the outskirts of the town. In many ways, these students seemed typical. They were interested in sports, television, music, and other teenagers. What wasn't so typical was that most of them had never seen a building or structure that was more than a couple of stories high. Some claimed to be bored with their lives on the reserve, and most confessed to a curiosity about city life and about urban pollution.

Before telling her students of the arrival of the Naskapi Cree students' letters, Inge wanted to have an introductory lesson on Schefferville and on the native people who lived in that area. Since I often had visited the town and the nearby reservation and since I had a collection of slides and souvenirs which I could show Inge's students, Inge asked me to design and to teach a lesson which would help the students to understand what sort of community Schefferville was.

I introduced the lesson by recapitulating some of the work that they had been doing about ancient native peoples. I told students that we were going to go on an imaginary journey, much like the one that they had taken when Inge had described her journey while playing background sounds and music. As well, I told them that we would be doing some detective work.

I asked specific students who volunteered to show me Ontario, Toronto, Quebec, and Montreal on a large classroom map of Canada. They had no problem finding these. Not surprisingly, no one was able to find Schefferville, so I pointed it out. They all seemed interested,

cooperative, and eager to participate.

I then showed them a number of slides, some of which had been snapped from the window of a small plane, while others had been taken on site. The pictures were of the vegetation, bodies of water, and colouring of the northern landscape; of Schefferville itself; and of the Naskapi Cree reservation. As I showed each slide, I asked the students to find evidence to prove or disprove the existence of running water, electricity, and mining, and to make predictions about the native population, the lifestyle, the food sources, the degree of pollution, the time of year, and the Naskapi Cree and Montagnais Cree religions.

The students seemed to enjoy this "game" and many volunteered to point out the fire hydrants, the sturdy vehicles, the one- and two-storey buildings, the French signs, and the Quebec flag. They proved themselves to be most observant and able to make all sorts of logical connections and reasonable predictions based on what they already knew.

They remarked on the clean air and clear water, and together we probed the possible reasons for the lack of pollution. We discussed the popular arctic char and caribou which the natives fished and hunted as much for winter food as for sport. Students noticed an arts and crafts shop in one of the slides, and I showed them handmade pairs of mitts made from moose, caribou and beaver; the decorative purse that, several years after having been made, still smelled of the smoke used in the curing process. I showed them the Cree T-shirt from Chibougamou that depicted the native children sitting in a tepee. Inge's students wanted to hear all about the nomadic style of the winter caribou hunt that usually lasted several weeks.

We talked about the climate and about how the vegetation was linked to weather conditions. Students asked numerous questions about native lifestyle and traditions. At this point in the lesson, unaware of the plans that Inge and I had made, one of them asked if the class could write to the students in Schefferville. With that, Inge and I confessed that we had a special package for them.

When told that we had received letters from students in Schefferville, they could barely contain their excitement. They read the letters voraciously and immediately began commenting on what they were reading and on the accompanying photos and article. They were amazed that, unlike themselves, the Naskapi Cree students all had straight dark hair and dark eyes; that there were not more than seventy-two houses, a church, a garage, a store, and a police station on the reservation; and that the name of the village was to them an incomprehensible Cree word of some fifteen letters in length. As their observations gave way to comments and questions, Inge and I encouraged the students to direct these to the Naskapi Cree students themselves.

The Naskapi Cree teenagers discussed their favourite Montagnais Cree singers, American bands, and Canadian sports teams. They talked of the different northern coastal towns and Arctic villages which had been home to their parents or which had been their own birthplaces. They described the cold, early winter that had arrived and the herd of thirty caribou that had recently passed by their village. They told of their hunting and fishing trips and of their families.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Inge's students, reluctant writers among them, could not wait to reply to these letters. This was the last period of the day and fewer than fifteen minutes remained of it, but the students did not care. They wanted to begin drafting their letters to the Naskapi Cree students immediately. Inge furnished them with paper and let them start.

Her students, too, chose to begin their letters with autobiographical information, introducing themselves to these native teenagers whom they would never meet. They told them of the slides they had seen and commented on how different their city was from the native students' village. "I've seen your town," wrote one of Inge's students. "It's nothing like a city"[26].

Inge told her students that the native students might be rather shy and advised her class to ask specific questions and to give lots of details about their own lives. They told the native students of the urban air pollution and about the population of their school. They asked for more descriptive details of their new pen pals and requested more photographs.

Immediately, Inge's class seemed to understand that they were both similar to and different from the Naskapi Cree. They had similar interests in sports and family, for example, but more importantly, Inge's students now were aware of how much more they did not know about the native peoples. Their rough drafts include a number of questions that begged detailed information while revealing the beginnings of a respect for the Naskapi Cree culture.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of this activity was the length of the letters that Inge's students wrote. Most quickly and easily filled a page, a rare occurrence for this group.

Students finished rough drafts of their letters in the next class or at home and then began their second drafts. Not only did some of Inge's students write final copies neatly and carefully, but some even chose to type them. In short order, the letters were then packaged and sent to Schefferville.

This letter writing activity was quite encouraging: perhaps Inge and I had succeeded in getting the students truly involved in this topic. They were excited about writing to and getting to know the native students. This in turn, Inge believed, translated itself into a motivation to do well. "They think [getting to know the native students] is neat," she grinned.

In this composed (extended) activity, neither Inge nor I provided any framework or instructions for these letters, but rather we supported the students by helping them to do what *they* were trying to do. In a Vygotskian "enabling other" manner, we made suggestions, proofread drafts, and organized the mailing of these letters to Schefferville.

Although we had worked behind the scenes to have the students in Schefferville send letters to Inge's class and had planned a lesson that would pique their curiosity about the native students there, the decision to write letters in response was not *ours* but *theirs*. That is what we hoped would happen, of course, but the distinction drawn here is important. As a result of this affective engagement, they wrote much lengthier pieces than they usually were seen to do, and cared about how their letters sounded and looked as well as whether the mechanics were correct.

---

[26] Students letter: Nov. 7.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Discussion

As stated at the beginning of this paper, responsive choreography is an attempt to describe the complexities and the nuances of the interaction between teachers and students. Particularly, it is an attempt to encapsulate how effective teachers sequence and assess student work and how they incorporate new knowledge about student understanding into subsequent lesson structures and strategies.

In this case, did Inge ever fall within the parameters of the concept? The short answer: seldom. In those instances when she did, she was surprised by the outcome as evidenced in the last activity described above. At these times, she shifted her focus from the curriculum to be taught to how students assimilated the material, which was different from her normal teaching practice. Inge's style, philosophy, and assumptions about what ought to be taught had a powerful impact on the planning of lessons in this unit and overshadowed her responsiveness to the clues and cues of student learning. Although we met weekly and discussed students' work and the success of the lessons, she used these sessions as opportunities to vent her frustration with the quality of student work, with the curriculum deadlines under which she was working, and with the interpersonal relationships and rules within her school. Not until the "Interviewing Immigrants" activity did she begin to consider some of the possibilities for writing and some of the lesson ideas I had presented. Until that activity, she had planned her lessons as though we had never talked: she knew what she wanted the students to do, and she had her own reasons for wanting to assign specific tasks. Even though I had been making suggestions, raising issues, and passing on relevant research in articles and chapters about the use of writing in learning, I did not feel that any of this was having much impact.

Inge was very organized and systematic. However, instead of responding to students' cues about their learning as evidenced in their work, she carefully structured information which she believed was important for the students to learn and sequenced the activities in a neat and linear fashion. Those lessons which built on a foundation of previous learning were often successful, unless her focus on detail or structure resulted in lessons in which the multiple steps and drafts reduced or eliminated students' affective involvement.

By contrast, the latter part of the unit Inge organized very differently from the way in which she had structured the earlier lessons and activities; she focussed on our assessment of student work and interest. In the "Native Peoples Project," students were to do the work largely in their own time. That this project followed a series of discussions which Inge and I had about recent research on writing and assessment suggests that those sessions may have influenced her lesson plans. Neither of us had been sure that any of what we had read and discussed would yield positive results with these particular students, but both of us believed that the students could be more successful than they had been. We agreed that a new approach was needed. In this work, students followed their own interests and questions, produced a summary of what they had learned and shared this summary with their peers.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Inge's style and philosophy influenced the use of writing in activities in this unit from the very first lesson. She wanted her students to achieve, established clear criteria and stated that she would not accept less than their best efforts. Students were told that work not meeting her standard would be returned to them to be redone until it was judged as adequate. By setting high expectations and by insisting that students meet them, Inge believed that she could help all students to do well. She told them that she believed they could all earn As in the course if they "met the criteria," and this they could do if they tried hard enough. While these comments did not seem to have any effect on the work habits or effort of some students, others took the cue from her and seemed encouraged and even energized by Inge's comments, but their resolutions to work harder were short-lived.

Although the students did have the opportunity to revise and resubmit their work for evaluation, some of the students lacked the prior knowledge or the skills which they needed to do the assignments. It is more likely that with effort, guidance, practice, and feedback, the less successful students could pass the course than receive top grades, while the more successful ones could strive for As. In any case, Inge had faith that detailed, structured assignments would eventually help all students to become self-disciplined and to produce work which was carefully done.

The "Native Peoples Project" was the first activity in which Inge did not control the students through a detailed list of instructions or through a series of questions: her presentation was brief and her instructions few. Instead, she responded to how students learned and *supported* that learning: she showed related films; she arranged time for them to work in the library; she allowed them to use the classroom before school and at lunch hours in order to work on their projects; and she offered them books and other materials.

In the "Letters to Schefferville" activity, Inge may have been trying to get me to understand how difficult teaching these students was, since by this time she was quite frustrated by their incomplete work and poor test results. Her asking me to give the introductory lesson may have been, in part, a result of my having offered to her a number of artifacts from my visits to northern communities, but it may also have been a challenge, too. It may be that I was meant to learn that these students would not listen and would not do the work that was assigned. What we both learned, however, was something more important. These students responded well to activities which were responsive to their interests and in which they could ask and answer *their* questions rather than the teacher's or the text's.

In both the "Native Peoples Project" and the "Letters to Schefferville," we learned that the students' affective engagement was a necessary condition for success. When affectively involved, they put forth a good effort; they cared about the product; and they demonstrated their ability to learn.

However, assessment of students' work was not sufficient to provide the cues necessary to develop a responsive lesson. In several cases the use of technical language in written products did

not necessarily indicate the level of a student's understanding but merely a student's effort to achieve to Inge's standards. For example, a student might copy verbatim words or phrases from the textbook that seemed appropriate given the assignment. If combined with other forms of assessment such as observation, oral presentations and analysis of students' questions, the use of written work to evaluate learning was clarified or weaknesses identified. Most critically, however, when students were given an opportunity to manipulate and to become involved affectively in creatively presenting what they had learned, written evidence of their having assimilated the material increased.

While some activities were more responsive to student learning, Inge stated that she chose both fewer activities overall and fewer student-directed activities in particular than she might have given the time constraints imposed by the administration. In the interests of "getting through the material," she chose more teacher-directed and tightly structured activities which she felt ensured that the students would learn the textbook information.

Conclusions

Responsive choreography suggests a reorientation by teachers to consider students and their learning first, and the curriculum second. By developing understanding through a constant cycle of assessment of the cues students present through their work, teachers can design lessons that meet the peculiarities of their classes. When the teacher's concentration is not on students but on other factors such as artificial, externally derived standards and time frames, teachers may become frustrated with the lack of student progress given perceived student ability, as happened in Inge's case.

In this study students provided Inge with sufficient cues and clues about their learning and their engagement in it through various means. The students here responded to tasks of interest with focussed attention and effort, with work that was better than anticipated, and with discussions that demonstrated the connections being made. When work was beyond them or of little interest, they reduced effort, engaged in off-task behaviour, and had little interest in their written work either in its completion or in the finished product. Unfortunately, Inge's focus was not primarily on student learning and on the messages students sent her, but on her own ideas of what they ought to know.

During the months we worked together, Inge eventually saw the value of being responsive in her instructional choreography, but to sustain this approach would require the difficult task of reexamining her practice. This suggests that the reorientation and use of responsive choreography may not be as easy as it seems. Subtle verbal and nonverbal cues, the nuances of responses to questions, and the assessment of work may require a degree of perceptiveness that takes time and practice for teachers to foster. However, given the potential success of lessons in promoting student learning as in the case of the "Schefferville letters," the effort seems to be very worthwhile. The use of the concept "responsive choreography" as a framework for the improvement of

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

instructional practice for experienced teachers and in the preparation of new teachers requires an examination of several of its aspects.

Factors impacting on a responsive choreography

a) Teacher's knowledge of self

Teachers need to reflect upon and to analyze their own behaviour and patterns of responses to students' attempts to learn. This ought to include assessments not only of their actions, but also of their affective responses to positive student actions to instruction and to students' frustration when comprehension of the material is not immediate. By surfacing their own patterns of beliefs and assumptions about students and how they learn, teachers may be consciously able to modify their own responses and behaviours, and given this awareness, to learn new practices or to adapt previously successful instructional strategies. In this context, mere reflection is insufficient as a response to action; teachers must consciously work to translate reflection into action, and where necessary, to incorporate new understanding or to modify what they know about instruction and their practice of it.

b) Knowledge and use of instructional practice

A teacher's ability to employ effective responsive choreography appears to develop over time as long as it is supported by some aspect of on-going professional development, such as support for reflection-on-action (Little, 1982; Stoll, 1992). In this way, they may begin to understand how students respond to particular strategies as well as which strategies to use, and how to use them, with particular students. This suggests that developing effective responsive choreography, the ability to integrate analysis of student need with action, may be one of the skills that sets effective teachers apart from their less effective peers.

c) Knowledge of students

Being able to analyze student need is not sufficient. Responsive choreography also requires a knowledge of a number of factors simultaneously. Among these are an understanding of students' feelings, the dynamics of student interactions, and an awareness of classroom feeling tone or atmosphere. While overt actions and statements of students are readily identified and quite easily considered when planning for instruction, more subtle nuances of student responses or changes to their behaviour must also be taken into consideration. These nuances are more likely to be missed unless teachers have a sound understanding of students' patterns of learning.

d) Knowledge of the curriculum and subject area

In addition to these key components, a teacher also needs to have a sound grasp of the topic under study, for without such knowledge, it is unlikely that students' errors will be anticipated or

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

even noticed. If teachers know the facts, concepts and skills within a subject area, students' confusion, misunderstanding, erroneous assumptions, or gaps in knowledge can be readily seen. If unfamiliar with the material, teachers' focus may be on the mechanism of content delivery rather than on the analysis of student learning. When teachers know the material, they recognize patterns of common errors or difficulties which previous classes have made, and are alert for, and hence are quickly responsive to, similar problems.

Limitations Placed on Teachers' Use of Responsive Choreography

The notion "responsive" coupled with "choreography" attempts to portray accurately how teachers subtly use their knowledge and skills to create a powerful dance of learning for the individual within a particular context of an extended learning opportunity, while encompassing and responding to the needs of several actors.

Teachers may wish to be responsive to students, but external and personal factors may influence the degree to which they can be responsive. One often cited external factor was the mandated "covering" of the curriculum within specified time limits, limits placed on teachers by administration or by the need to share scarce resources such as textbooks. In Inge's case, this factor was compounded by concerns for her health, by feelings of being overwhelmed by the complexity of her classroom, and by her belief that she did not have administrative support for her teaching.

a) Implications for experienced teachers

Professional development needs to be redesigned to be an integral part of school life (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998) in order to encourage teachers to build responsiveness into their planning and to help them to increase proficiency in this area. As Little (1982) suggested, one means is to provide opportunities for teachers to view each other through collaborative efforts to improve practice. The context for such an initiative may be in the development of action research programs.

b) Implications for pre-service teachers

If we hope to understand how to improve instruction, we need to develop in pre-service teachers the sense of importance of attending to a myriad of different classroom cues including the students' affective responses and the subtleties of their responses to our teaching. By increasing our sensitivity and focus, we may be better able to adapt instruction. This does not mean placing all responses on an equal level of importance; some responses are not the reaction to learning, but may reflect such aspects as external influences or factors beyond our control. While these need to be acknowledged, they may not assume the key role played by specific student reactions to our teaching.

While reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983) are important tools in

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

analysing instruction and student learning, they represent only one part of what teachers need to consider. In preparing teachers, we need to have them understand that strategies are not fixed, that they must be adapted when and where necessary in response to students' reactions to our teaching.

To be able to teach well, pre-service teachers must understand the fundamentals of learning in order to be able to analyse student responses to their instruction. They must also demonstrate an understanding of the foundation upon which each strategy is based so that they can manipulate each strategy to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. To impose a strategy without careful consideration of the learner may be as jarring to students as a misplaced dance step is to a dance partner.

References

Applebee,A. (1981). *Writing in the secondary school.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.

Applebee, A. (1984). Writing and Reasoning. *Review of Educational Research, 54* (4): 577-596.

Atwell, N. (Ed.) (1990). *Coming to know: Writing to learn in the intermediate grades.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books

Bretzing, B. and Kulhavy, R. (1979). Notetaking and depth of processing. *Contemporary educational psychology, 4:* 145-53.

Eisner, E. (1991). *The enlightened eye.* New York: Macmillan.

Goodman, Y. (1978). Kid watching: An alternative to testing. *National Elementary School Principal, 57*: 41-45.

Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times.* London: Cassell.

Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (1998). *What's worth fighting for out there?* Toronto: Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation.

Hoffman, D. (1996). Culture and self in multicultural education: reflections on discourse, text, and practice. *American Educational Research Journal, 33* (3): 545-570.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Johnson, R. and Gill, K. (1987). Writing to learn - Writing a basic for middle level students. *NASSP Bulletin 71* (501): 70-75.

Kilbourn, B. (1998). *For the love of teaching*. London, ON: Althouse.

Labaree, D. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal, 34* (1): 39-82.

Langer, E. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley

Langer, J. and Applebee, A. (1987). *How writing shapes thinking*. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE.

Little, J.W. (1982). Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions of school success. *American Educational Research Journal, 19* (3): 325-340.

Martin, N., D'Arcy, P., Newton, B., and Parker, R. (1976). *Writing and learning across the curriculum*. London: Ward Lock Educational.

Mayher, J., Lester, N., and Pradl,G. (1983). *Learning to write/Writing to learn*. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boyton/Cook Publishers, Inc.

Mevarech, Z. & Kramarski, B. (1997). IMPROVE: A multidimensional method for teaching mathematics in heterogeneous classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal, 34* (2): 365-394.

Needles, M. (April, 1992). "Orienting Writing Instruction Towards Meaningful Communication in Classrooms That Serve Children From Low-Income Families." A paper presented at the American Educational Research Association's Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California.

Parker , R. and Goodkin, V. (1987). *The consequences of writing*. Upper Montclair: Boyton/Cook Publishers, Inc.

Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

_____. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Spencer, E. (1983). *Writing matters: Across the curriculum*. Edinburgh: Scottish Council for research in Education.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Stoll, L. (1992). Teacher growth in effective schools. In M. Fullan and A. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Teacher development and educational change*, pp. 104-122. London : Falmer Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University press.

Wertsch, J. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Willinsky, J. (1990). *The new literacy*. New York: Routledge.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE